

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

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"Creatio ex deo," 12x12. Encaustic and oil
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Buddhist Discrimination Against Women in Modern Burma

By Saccavadi Bricker

I present this information based on my experience as a female Burmese Buddhist mendicant nun in the Theravada tradition for twenty-two years, from 1986 to 2008. I ordained as a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka in 2003. Upon my return to Burma in 2005 to visit my dying father, I was thrown into prison, in the capital city of Rangoon, for being ordained as a nun. I was detained in the prison for seventy-six days, from May 27 to August 10, 2005.

My release was based only upon my willingness to unconditionally apologize for ordaining as a female monk. After issuing a formal apology to my captors, I was released from prison, taken directly to Yangon Airport, and immediately sent back to Sri Lanka.

Today, at the age of forty-three, I see and understand the world and nature, life and death, religion and politics. I have the clarity to understand that the information I present here—my story—is an important part of the history of Burmese tilashins/silashins (Buddhist female monks). Even though going to prison was difficult, I now also recognize that Burmese Buddhists needed to see female monks to realize that Buddhism is a religion that allows equal rights and equal opportunities.

Neither Buddhism, a practice of transforming oneself with love, compassion, and wisdom, nor the Buddha, an ideal description of man enjoying life without harming oneself or others, helped me appeal to those monks who had the authority to imprison me. I came to know deeply that these monks did not truly understand that Buddhism is about the practice of love, compassion, and wisdom, even though they all said that they understood.

Who were they? They were mainly the State Executive Buddhist Monks of the Union of Burma (Myanmar), who served in the year 2002 to 2005—the forty-seven senior monks selected from the nationwide States and Divisions.

Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann



Saccavadi at the home she shares with her husband in California, photographed on April 21, 2010.

Becoming a Mendicant

I was unaware that Buddhist discrimination against women existed in Burma until I became a Buddhist mendicant at the age of twenty-one years old.

I began going on retreats after mother passed away. During the retreats, I heard many stories about ancient Buddhist saints and their practices, and how they used their practice to overcome negative forces. Venerable Pannyajota, the monk who gave the dhamma talks at these retreats, was abbot of a monastery named Duta and ran a nunnery named Mani. The nunnery was located just over a mile away from the monastery, deep in the forests of southern Burma.

In his Dhamma talks, Venerable Pannyajota emphasized the goodness of living in robes not only for oneself, but also for

others, including deceased relatives! I felt guilty about not having much opportunity to care for my mother while she was ill, and believed that by becoming a nun it would help both of our future rebirths.

I decided to renounce just like the Buddha did, to live a life in robes and with bowl. I continued university for two more years in order to complete my B.A. degree. After my final exams, I took a train to get to Ven. Pannajota's monastery, where he ordained me with the help of several of his thilashins. At the time I did not think to ask him why we were not fully ordained bhikkhunis like the bhikkhunis of ancient Buddhist stories, but I noticed immediately that discrimination against women was very entrenched within the male Buddhist mendicant society in Burma. I felt very sad about this, but wanted to ordain for the benefit and well-being of my mother, myself, and all beings.

After several weeks in robes, I joined three other new thilashins in following Ven. Pannajota's on retreats to small towns and villages throughout the Irrawaddy Delta. After a couple of retreats, he dropped us off at a nunnery named Dipa, which stood next to a small monastery where the resident abbot was about fifty years old. The entire site was an ancient Buddhist ruin converted into a make-shift residence. The nunnery was a sequence of ramshackle wooden huts, with large gaps in the wall boards and thatched roofs that had been attached to the side of the monastery. The nuns lived together in one of the huts, even during the winter when cold and wind seeped through the walls and roof. It was here also that we were to learn the texts for chanting the daily prayers.

We told Ven. Pannajota that we only wanted to meditate and did not wish to learn the texts. He replied that we would not enjoy meditating all the time and that there would soon come a time when we become bored with meditation. He stated that the Pali texts would help to cheer us up and motivate us, so we began to study the texts.

Daily Life at Dipa

We got up at 4 a.m. each morning and walked across a small field to get to the room where we—the abbot and twelve nuns—sat, prayed and meditated together.

Typically, breakfast was eaten at 5 a.m., and was followed by chores, studying texts, chanting and meditating. At 10:30 a.m. we had lunch together in the dining hall, one of the few brick buildings. With lunch, we had finished with our food for the day and would not eat again until dawn the next morning. The thilashins would drink only water after midday, and early on suffered greatly from hunger during the evening and at night. We were afraid that we'd experience this suffering for the rest of our lives, but after one month, the hunger did not trouble us anymore! I was amazed that my body could live with so little food. Meals for both breakfast and lunch were very simple, and usually included rice, fish sauce, and beans or vegetables.

There was no electricity, and water had to be fetched from a well for drinking, cooking, bathing, and for use in the outhouse. During retreats we did not need to busy ourselves with preparing and cooking food, but in the nunnery we had to take care of many daily duties, including cooking full meals for about fifteen thilashins. Our cooking duties included chopping and carrying wood for cooking, building the fire for cooking, carrying water from the well, and removing many small rocks from the raw rice. We cooked the rice in a big pot and took great care to make sure it didn't burn on the bottom. We cut veggies for use in curries, made our own fish sauce, and carried all the food to the dining hall to serve to the thilashins. Afterwards, the nuns washed all the serving platters, utensils and dishes.

We walked on alms rounds together, each nun carrying a large tray on her head with another small tray inside it. The farmers gave us raw rice and money which was received first in the small tray, then transferred to the larger tray. Very few new nuns had experience carrying a tray in this manner and more often than not, the trays fell off of our heads. We could only watch in dismay as the precious raw rice grains scattered across the ground, feeling saddened because this meant that we'd have less food that night, and also because we felt badly for the hard-working farmers who had shared their rice with us. During the rainy season, nearly everything collected on alms rounds became water-logged, or simply blew away in the heavy winds.

We were never taught about why Theravada Buddhist nuns had to keep the eight precepts, that is: (1) not killing, (2) not stealing, (3) not telling lies, (4) not having sex in any form, (5) not taking intoxicants, (6) not having meals after midday, (7) not dancing, not singing, not playing music, not watching entertainments, not using perfumes, cosmetics, lipsticks, not reciting idle charms and poems, and (8) not sitting on luxurious seats or beds. But we strictly followed these eight precepts without knowing why we were asked to do so. We prayed each day for the generous villagers and farmers, for our families and for our fellow sisters and brothers in Dhamma—and for everybody, every creature, to be well and happy.

Return to Mani

After about three months at Dipa nunnery, all of the thilashins were sent back to Mani nunnery. I lived and trained there for seven years, until I received the Dhamma-acariya (teacher of Dhamma) designation. We were taught the Pali Canon and Buddhist texts by the monks at the monastery. There were about eighty resident monks and novices at the monastery.

Mani nunnery was once an old monastery, too. Ven. Pannajota inherited it from a monk who passed away, and converted it into a nunnery. Ven. Pannajota's was a talented speaker, and excelled at giving public Dhamma talks. He gave talks to very large crowds during his retreats, with an emphasis on the

goodness of the Buddha, and the practices of ancient male and female Buddhist renunciates. He wanted to fill his new nunnery with young nuns from middle class families, and very soon there were approximately fifty young ladies in residence.

5-1 All of the nuns were virgins and most were very young, ranging in age from thirteen to thirty-two. We lived together in a long hall with no privacy. Each nun was assigned a two foot wide personal space along the wall of the hall, in which to put her small box of robes and books. We could store few books in such a small space and therefore borrowed most textbooks from our small library. The space was designated for both for sleeping and studying, and during the three months of the rainy season we lived in this space nearly continuously. In summer and winter, when the weather was more hospitable, most of the nuns studied and slept outside the hall under the trees.

Again there was no electricity, and water for drinking, cooking and other uses was hauled from an open well. Most of the nuns sat in the dark at night without kerosene lamps or candles, memorizing what they learned in the daytime. Some of the nuns had memorized long discourses from the Pali Canon, and took part in religious exams after the night prayer ended at 6 p.m.

Once a week, very early in the morning, we would leave the nunnery and walk to the village for alms rounds. We walked in procession with each nun holding a deep bowl into which the villagers would place rice, money, onions, garlic, and small packets of indigenous herbs. Some boys and men, usually relatives of the local nuns, helped us by carrying larger bags and baskets.

5-2 The diligent practice and strong beliefs about the goodness of living in mendicants' robes meant that the nuns rarely complained or commented upon the food, shelter, lack of medical care, and generally poor living conditions. During the first few years after becoming nuns, most of the women were still quite healthy, but after approximately six years, virtually every nun was weak and sometimes became ill.

Once a week during the three months of the rainy season, the villagers cooked curries and gave it to all Buddhist mendicants in the village—we were grateful for such nutritious treats, and saved as much curry as we could for the next several days; however, repeatedly reheating the curries often made us ill. Yet we continued to mindfully practice and serve, believing that we would receive a most fortunate rebirth if we kept the precepts, learned the Buddha-Dhamma, and carefully followed the instructions given to us by the monks.

5-4 The Deception

Ven. Pannyajota ordained us not as fully ordained bhikkhunis (the traditional female monastic form created by the Buddha), but as female mendicants of modern Burmese Buddhism—silashins or thilashins. After the nunnery had been



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

5-5 filled with tilashins, the emphasis of Ven. Pannyajota's talks changed from the benefits of ordaining to subjects such as generosity and preserving the Buddha's teachings.

Every year after the rains retreat, a great ceremony was held at Duta monastery. During this gathering, all of the monks in the province came from neighboring villages to perform rites and rituals. The villagers attended the ceremony and brought offerings such as sandals, flowers, food, and robes.

Two large loud speakers were pointed towards the village. The villagers could hear the ceremony, which included a Dhamma talk and questions and answers from the monks. During the ceremony I heard these words: "Now is the time for all male monks to cleanse their own misdeeds by performing this ceremony." He then continued, "There are no female monks here today because their kind died out many centuries ago. The sangha of nuns can never be revived because women are unable to keep the precepts."

We, the nuns, had always diligently and gratefully kept our precepts. We had served the monks, each another, and the villagers with gratitude and with open hearts. We loved the Buddha, the Dhamma, the sangha with every cell in our being. We had meditated for years, memorized and studied many of the discourses, learned Pali, and embraced the Buddha-

Dhamma with sincerity and diligence. And on that day, we had brought flowers to the monastery; we had cleaned, swept, moped, and lovingly decorated the sima (the sacred building in which ceremonies were held).

We were shocked and confused when we heard the monks say that we did not exist. The villagers could also hear the words of the monks clearly. I was surprised by what I had heard, and immediately felt that something was terribly wrong with the ceremony because I knew that **we, the nuns, were here, and that we were as capable as monks in keeping the precepts**, as virtuous and dedicated Buddha-Dhamma practitioners, and as compassionate and loving beings.

Each year a small ceremony was held to give monks, novices, and nuns certificates for passing various Pali exams. All of the nuns at Mani and Dipa had studied hard and passed the nationwide exams in top positions. **Our names were broadcast on radio and on television, and Ven. Pannyajota was very pleased, stating that his decision to convert the monastery to a nunnery was the right one.**

We had heard stories about how Ven. Pannyajota encountered difficulties while establishing the nunnery because the head villagers strongly opposed the idea of female renunciates and had stopped giving him alms. Later, they apologized to him at the railway station when Ven. Pannyajota was about to leave the village for good. Ven. Pannyajota had vowed to become a Buddha in his final rebirth, and believed that all monks, novices and nuns would become arahats (non-returners). It was exciting for all of the monastics at his monastery to share in this belief, and it motivated us to practice diligently.

In our nunnery, there were about five devout elder nuns in the position of looking after the young nuns. But most of the elder nuns were ill much of the time, and wanted to do more meditation and fewer exams or Canon studies. The young nuns continued meditating and studying, and passing the exams every year. We were growing up, and our practices were maturing and deepening, too.

All nuns, including the elder nuns, were told by the monks that no matter their age or number of Vassas (rains retreats),

We were shocked and confused when we heard the monks say that we, the nuns, did not exist.

During the ceremony, the village men took care of handing out the certificates to the nuns, who usually received them before the monk received theirs. The man handing out the certificates called the name of the first nun without telling her where to sit in order to receive the document. The hall had a platform only slightly higher than the floor, and when the nun approached the platform, **the man suddenly pulled away the only empty chair left on the stage. He then dragged out a thin, torn, dusty mat for the nun to sit upon.** Fortunately, each nun always kept with her a small sitting cloth. The first nun peacefully laid her sitting cloth on the mat to receive her certificate for higher exams with honors, and the other nuns followed suit. I could see that the monks and novices were watching the nuns with compassion in their eyes. After the nuns received their certificates the villager brought the chair back out onto the stage for the novices and monks. He then called out the name of a ten year old novice, who sat on the chair to receive his certificate.

they were to always bow to any male monk even if he was a five year old novice in robes for less than a day. The male monks and novices were told never to bow to nuns under any circumstance. Further, the nuns were informed that they were not to perform rites and rituals during Vassa. Following the advice of the monks, young nuns were to bow to old nuns even if the old nuns had been only recently ordained.

Male monks of the Burmese Theravada tradition are adamant that “lay people and nuns should bow down to monks because monks undertake more precepts” (227 precepts). However, in the Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha (bhikkhuni monastic code) there are 311 precepts—**84 more than those of male monks!** By their own reasoning, then it seems that those male monks would have to bow to bhikkhunis for undertaking more precepts. However, since Theravada bhikkhunis are currently not recognized in Burma, the argument is unfortunately moot.

On the Mani property there was a big pineapple field and many fruit trees whose fruit, when sold, helped to raise money

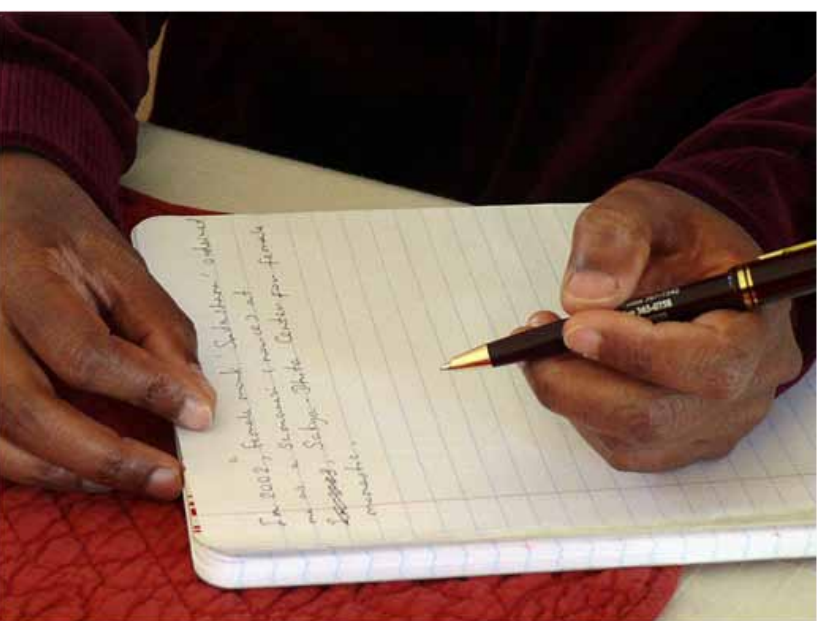
for renovating the old nunnery. While the numbers of newly ordained elder nuns were rapidly increasing in our nunnery, the population of teacher monks was also increasing at the neighboring monastery, with approximately one hundred and twenty resident monks and seven teacher monks. Many of the elder nuns looking out for the young nuns were also very devoted to supporting male monks and novices. They would ask younger nuns to peel pineapples and cut them into small pieces, which were then given to the monks. We peeled them and cut them until our fingers were bleeding from the acid, then we put the pineapple pieces into large metal pots and carried them just over a mile to the neighboring monastery. There was never any pineapple offered to or leftover for the nuns.

speech and action, and past rebirths. They stated that because of the menstrual cycle, women were more emotional than men, were weak and carried very many corruptions, and were unable to undertake and keep monastic precepts. In short, women were deemed unfit for monastic life, while men were viewed as ideal candidates. It was publicly stated that female renunciates—the Bhikkhuni Sangha—disappeared not too long after the Buddha's parinibbana because of “the problems of being women.” In their public talks, some monks also went as far as to add cruel anecdotes that denigrated women.

In 1980, the Burmese government instituted a Ministry of Religious Affairs, a Department of Religious Affairs, and a Director General was appointed to lead the two organizations, which consisted of a group of forty-seven monks selected from across the nation. These monks held the rank of State Executive Monk, and under them sub-groups of monks were assembled as State, Provincial, and Village Executive Monks. Their responsibilities included lesser duties such as dealing with disputes over ownership of monasteries, and larger duties such as translation and interpretation of the Pali Canon. At this time there were several renowned monks who were arrested for having many wives. Some were arrested for being drunk, others for gambling, and still others for engaging in sexual relations.

The ‘Practice of Rites’ (Repeated Ordinations) was highly popular by 1994 and renowned monks were often ordained many times within a one month period—basically whenever lay Buddhists were willing to sponsor the expense of an ordination. The ordinations were generally performed by six monks—sometimes more—and when the monks exited the sima (the sacred ceremony) building, lay people were standing in a long line outside to put money, gifts, herbs, and other offerings into their alms bowls. The monks proclaimed that the sima had cleansed away their misdeeds and made them arahats or Buddhist ‘saints’. Since it is believed that giving to arahats is of immense benefit to the one who is giving, the dana offering line-ups were long.

It is also critical to note that there were a number of sincere monks who refused government gifts including items such as money, rice, oil, candles, robes, umbrellas, and sandals. They refused this support because they were aware that the offerings were a result of corruption and wished no part of it. Many of the sincerely practising monks who refused government support were arrested for causing ‘disharmony’ with the (corrupt) Buddhist monks, subsequently receiving minimum three year sentences in remote prisons. One of the monks sentenced to jail was a highly respected and educated monk who had received the highest noble Buddhist title of Tipitakadharadhammabhad-dhagarika (‘Treasurer of the House of Dhamma’: one who has memorized nearly all three baskets of the Pali Canon). Other monks fled, travelling abroad and waiting things out until it felt safe enough to return to Burma. During this intense period of



Saccavadi documents her experience as a Theravada bhikkhuni. Photographed on April 21, 2010.

Corrupt Burmese Buddhism

In Burma, Buddhism has survived even through the many generations who have suffered wars between ancient Burmese kings, ethnic wars between various tribes, and world wars. After Burma's independence from the British, the Burmese government adopted Buddhist laws in an effort to protect and sustain the Theravada Buddhist tradition. While these laws helped to protect sincere monks and nuns as they went on alms rounds, by ensuring that they weren't arrested as beggars, essentially these laws were created to prevent corrupt monks and nuns from degrading the robes.

Abject poverty has shaped Buddhism in Burma, especially during the 1980's. In Burma, Buddhism also became a religion that fully discriminates against women. In the 80's and 90's, the majority of monks gave public Dhamma talks stating that the female body is born as the result of bad kamma, thought,



The beautiful altar on Saccavadi's front porch welcomes visitors.

corruption, both Buddhist mendicants and lay people were equally vulnerable to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and it was difficult for them to help or support each other.

In this same time frame, a renowned monk of an ethnic Burmese people called the Paohh tribe had lived in a cave and meditated there in isolation for many years. His name was Samannya (Thamannya) Sayadaw, and he had ordained approximately one hundred male novices at the same time. They were ordained for no more than three days when the Ministry of Religious Affairs heard about it, and requested that the Director General of the Department of Religious Affairs send a delegation to request that Samannya Sayadaw not do this again. Samannya Sayadaw was forced to sign a statement admitting that his ordination procedure was invalid. He signed it, and did not do it again.

While many monks lived simple lives, contented and satisfied with little, keeping their precepts, going on alms rounds each day, meditating and studying the Pali Canon, other monks were trying to achieve fame and fortune by vastly expanding their monasteries and filling them with luxuries. There was an enormous gap between rich and poor Buddhist monks and nuns. In the mid-90's, there were ca. 500,000 Buddhist monks and novices and ca. 45,000 Buddhist tilashin nuns in Burma. Many lay Buddhists were extremely poor while many monks were extremely wealthy and living in luxury.

The State Executive Monks were not rich themselves, and seemed unaware that there was a growing demand for change; at the time many Buddhists voiced a preference for both the simplicity of traditional Buddhist practice and for traditional Buddhist bhikkhuni ordination. The lower status of Buddhist nuns had had a harmful effect on lay women in Burma in general. There had been a failed attempt to revive the Burmese Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha in the 1930's. The Buddhist monk Adiccavamsa had written a book entitled '*Bhikkhuni Sasano Padesa*' ('The Criteria for Ordaining Bhikkhunis'). This book outraged Burmese Buddhists and led to Adiccavamsa's expulsion from the sangha. Adiccavamsa again attempted to bring a discussion about bhikkhuni ordination into the public view by publishing a new book entitled *Bhikkhuni Ayeypun: Buddhist Problems in Reviving the Bhikkhuni Sangha*. However, Adiccavamsa was again unable to convince the Burmese Buddhists that this was not wrong view and soon after publishing the second book, he disrobed. There were no further attempts at reviving the Burmese Bhikkhuni Sangha until the year 2002.

Arrest and Imprisonment

I had been living in Sri Lanka, as a tilashin, since the end of 1998. In 2001, I was informed about the ordination of the first Thai samaneri (female novice), a dedicated Theravada

practitioner who ordained in Sri Lanka. In 2002, I learned about an upcoming ordination opportunity that might give me the chance to ordained as a Theravada bhikkhuni. I consulted with the elder Burmese monks living in a Burmese monastery in Sri Lanka, called Makutarama Monastery, asking them if they knew anything about these upcoming ordinations. The elder monks told me, “You are an enemy of Theravada Buddhism. You have wrong view. You won’t be accepted as a samaneri or bhikkhuni, and you will only become a hermit of other religions because you have wrong view. It would be better if you got married and had five children rather than ordain.” The elder monks then travelled immediately to the Burmese Embassy in Sri Lanka and attempted to prevent the ordination from taking place. They also sent a letter to the State Executive Monks of Burma via the embassy, telling them of “my plan to ordain,” instead of the fact that I had only discussed with them what might be happening in Sri Lanka with the other planned ordinations.

The Consul General of the Burmese Embassy phoned me and informed me that he wished to see me at the embassy. I was astonished when I realized that the elder monks at Makutarama had informed the State Executive Monks and embassy officials. Immediately concerned that I would be ordered back to Burma, I decided to ordain instead as a samaneri, which would be far less threatening to the monks than a fully ordained bhikkhuni. Yet there remained a longing to wear bhikkhuni robes, this being the only vehicle for female renunciates that had been created by the Buddha himself. Knowing this, the robes of the Burmese tilashin/silashin that I had been wearing for sixteen years made me feel less confident in the legitimacy of my ordination.

And thus my file was opened with the State Executive Monks in Burma in 2002. I informed them of my decision to ordain as a samaneri and waited for their reaction. To my surprise, the Ministry of Religious Affairs did not strongly oppose samaneri ordination. This, in turn, helped encourage me to proceed with full ordination as a bhikkhuni in 2003. However, after my ordination in Sri Lanka, I was informed that the State Executive Monks wished to arrest me and had police standing by at the Rangoon airport. Fortunately, an opportunity arose to travel to Malaysia instead of returning to Burma.

Towards the end of 2004, I spoke with my father—who had by then ordained as a monk—by phone. He told me that he was terminally ill and that he wished to see me. I took the decision to return to Burma to be with him and to care for him. It seemed like an opportune time to visit my father, since the Department of Religious Affairs was engaged planning for the International Buddhist Conference, to be held in Rangoon in early 2005. There existed also the hope that this conference might help to open the door to re-establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Burma. So I returned to the country of my birth—my home—and shortly after the death of my father was

imprisoned in capital city of Rangoon for being a bhikkhuni.

I was detained in prison for seventy-six days, from May 27 to August 10, 2005. Further information about my arrest and imprisonment are currently available online, and will soon be available in an upcoming article entitled ‘Living as a Buddhist Monk/Nun’. Subsequent to my arrest, the Burmese government published two books on the case, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs enacted laws making Burmese bhikkhunis illegal. These books are currently being translated into English.ⁱ

Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann



In the desert near Yucca Valley, California. Photographed on April 21, 2010.

Last Words

Religion is man-made: wise and loving beings make Buddhist ideology useful in life, but ignorant people make it treacherous. No being shall have another chance to abuse me in the name of religion. I shall enjoy my life, appreciating the finest qualities of Buddhism, and I shall die knowing that no being has the right to abuse or punish another by appointing themselves the proprietor or adjudicator of Buddha-Dhamma. ❖

Saccavadi was born in Burma in 1965. She received a BA in Burmese Literature at Rangoon University in 1986 and in the same year was ordained as a tilashin. After earning an MA in Buddhism at Kelaniya University in 2000, she ordained as a samaneri in Sri Lanka in 2002. In 2003, Saccavadi and Ven. Gunasari Bhikkhuni became the first two Burmese women in the modern era to receive the dual higher ordination (*bhikkhuni upasampada*) in Sri Lanka.



ⁱ “Bhikkhuni Vinichaya, Decision that Female Burmese Monks of Theravada Buddhism in Modern Burma are Illegal”, first published in 2004, Publications of The Department of Religious Affairs, Kabha Aye Street, Yangon, Myanmar, by U Nyont Maung, Director of the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Union of Myanmar; and “Bhikkhuni bhava abhava vinichaya, Decision that Female Burmese Monks of Theravada Buddhism in Modern Myanmar are Criminals”, first published in 2006, Publications of The Department of Religious Affairs, Kabha Aye Street, Yangon, Myanmar, by U Zar Ni Win, Director of the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Union of Myanmar.

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*Once, while Mahánāga was begging alms at Nakulanagara,
he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl,
he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had
eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying,
“Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging
for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms
worth less than a kahāpana. The nun was an arahant.*

DhSA.399

3-1 3 Oct, 2016 15:49, monk Sarana

If this is to be taken for granted, then the misinterpretations that make up large portion of this essay will have to be understood as "falsehood", not as a "mistake".

3-2 10 Oct, 2016 16:02, monk Sarana

It is not fair to speak about monks without mentioning who exactly that was. The 47 monks of State Saṅghamahānāyaka Council are not responsible for the laws of Myanmar. There could be one or more monks who represent them, but by sheer representation the others do not become worthy of blame. It is not substantiated that the monks decided imprisonment, rather it is very much possible that the government made such decision and the monks had to accede. Dr. Hla Myint, an official from the Myanmar Ministry of Religious Affairs, assured me that the sentence of three months in prison for Bhikkhunī Saccavādī was issued by government decision without any influence of any monk whatsoever. This far Mrs. Bricker cannot see the facts because her bhikkhunī ordination she didn't have close relationship with those monks.

3-3 10 Oct, 2016 16:00, monk Sarana

Mrs. Bricker doesn't (purposely?) mention that the Burmese lineage of bhikkhunīs disappeared for unknown reason and what has been left for centuries were lay women who wanted to abandon the sensual pleasures of lay life and practise Buddhism even though ordination lineage was no more at hand. It is because of the non-discrimination of monks that (unlike e.g. in Thailand) these women were allowed to dress in robes that are similar/same as the monks' robes (there are number of monasteries in Myanmar where the eight/ten precept nuns were same color of robes as monks, all because the sayadaw himself decided so).

The general reason for avoiding renewal of bhikkhunī lineage is that the scriptures don't specifically allow that for the present situation, and monks are not certain whether the Buddha would. This is not because of discrimination, it is because of respect toward the Buddha's decisions as they are now available.

4-1 29 Sep, 2016 9:43, monk Sarana

Nuns are always free to decide whether they want to help in monastery, whether they want to dedicate themselves for education, or whether they want to meditate. Myanmar is immensely rich in monasteries, and sticking to a monastery where the person doesn't feel the freedom he/she expects is very doubtful, because there are many other monasteries which provide women entire freedom (such as Shwe Oo Min monastery where I've lived for over four years).

4-2 29 Sep, 2016 10:06, monk Sarana

Most of monasteries look just like that. The nunneries are not "richer" than monasteries, but there are many extremely poor monasteries in horrible conditions, in fact much worse than what is described here. (I.e. no clean drinkable water, no alms, toilet without water - bamboo sticks are used and reused instead etc.)

It is also important to mention that most of the "rich monasteries" are entirely open to nuns and nuns can stay there and enjoy clean, fee, peaceful environment for whatever Dhamma activities they want to do, even if they don't even lift a finger for the monks. This information was seriously missing in Mrs. Bricker's text.

4-3 3 Oct, 2016 15:50, monk Sarana

Many monasteries require monks to wake up at 3 AM. There are monks in Myanmar who avoid lying position completely, such as the Tipitakadhara Yaw Sayadaw, one of the 47 monks of the State Sangha Maya Nayaka Council.

4-4 10 Oct, 2016 15:46, monk Sarana

This is very strange, because this should be for all nuns everywhere. If Mrs. Bricker means that they didn't get any juice or sweets, then I have to mention that such special treatment is rarely available in monasteries as well. As mentioned before, there are many monasteries which are much poorer than the one Mrs. Brick describes.

4-5 29 Sep, 2016 9:52, monk Sarana

This is a very common way of hardship in monasteries. Nuns can carry their bowls in hands, I have seen many to do so. There is nothing "worse" in this case than in most of monasteries in Myanmar.

4-6 10 Oct, 2016 15:03, monk Sarana

Well, if the nuns asked, the monks would answer. There is so much knowledge that the nuns and monks should learn, that it is easy to miss something if one doesn't ask. Mrs. Bricker doesn't mention anywhere in her text (and in any other texts I read from her) that the nuns are prohibited from asking about Dhamma. Interestingly, the Buddha gave special exceptions to monks to answer questions of women and nuns even if that occasion would be otherwise unsuitable for talking (e.g. if they are two alone etc.). Sayadaw U Nandaka (from the Nandakārāma Monastery in Mingalardon, Yangon) also wonders whether this is misinterpretation of the contents of nuns' education.

5-1 10 Oct, 2016 16:00, monk Sarana

This is the most common condition for monks and novices throughout Myanmar. Up until recently the novices of Shwe Oo Min, a highly rich monastery, also lived like that. (The change that happened is that they received beds, otherwise all is same.) I myself remember to stay in this way in various monasteries in Myanmar and even in the Sri Lankan monastery of Burmese monks, the famous Makutarama (the main monastery of Burmese monks in Sri Lanka) for ten days.

5-2 29 Sep, 2016 9:59, monk Sarana

For monks and novices it is just the same.

5-3 29 Sep, 2016 10:02, monk Sarana

The kind and period of illness is not mentioned here. It is also not mentioned what did the ven. Paññājota do for the nuns when they were ill. If they passed their exams I guess they recovered. Details would be appreciated.

5-4 29 Sep, 2016 10:03, monk Sarana

As the text will show, there was no intention to deceive anyone. I believe that this word was selected based on Mrs. Brick's emotion, not because it would be "true".

5-5 29 Sep, 2016 10:05, monk Sarana

Well, if his monasteries were teeming with monks and nuns, then perhaps he didn't have reason to incite people to ordain under him. Rather, he would wish to make the existent community pure and beneficial.

5-6 10 Oct, 2016 15:46, monk Sarana

For a certain reason Mrs. Bricker doesn't mention that "female monks" referred to the Theravada Bhikkhuni lineage which was interrupted centuries ago. This would be clear from the word "yahan-ma", literally "female monk". The sayadaw accepted the thilashins (precept nuns) as precept nuns, not as bhikkhunīs, because this is the maximum that the monks could, in accordance with the Pali scriptures, support. Renewal of bhikkhunī lineage, as I mentioned before, is not very easy if the monks do not find such suggestion right from the Buddha in the existent scriptures (I speak about renewing, not establishment). What might have been the purpose of Mrs. Bricker to misinterpret the situation?

6-1 29 Sep, 2016 10:12, monk Sarana

This is all unnecessary misinterpretation of the bhikkhuni state and monk's trust to the scriptures. It should be also noted that after the British invasion the Burmese culture became much more keen on "preserving" their Buddhist tradition and scriptures. This is yet another reason why renewing bhikkhuni lineage is more complicated than Mrs. Bricker would like it to be.

29 Sep, 2016 10:18, monk Sarana

6-2

If the monks were so "discriminating", then it would be wonderful how they allowed women to study the same sacred texts as they do. Note that monks have a rule that prohibits them from "teaching" any Dhamma (by vocal training etc.) and revealing more than seven Dhamma sentences to women if men were not present. - These rules were established because when monks did that before, women were jealous, suspecting of monk's lust, or monks didn't know limit in their Dhamma teaching to attractive women.) So again, it seems to me that Mrs. Bricker contradicts herself when she mentions how much they were appreciated as nuns in contrast to how they were not appreciated.

10 Oct, 2016 15:45, monk Sarana

6-3

Again, thilashins are not bhikkhunīs, they are not female novices either. They are lay people who follow more precepts and who were given many privileges by monks who felt that although bhikkhunī-sāmaṇerī lineage disappeared, at least a kind of non-Vinaya nuns could be maintained. (Note that Pāḷi Vinaya Commentaries prohibit monks to ordain female novices, only bhikkhunīs may ordain female novices - to prevent monks from feeding their lust toward the female novices "they ordained"). It is very reasonable to appreciate monks for being still open to ordain thilashins even though this would not be appreciated by the strict Vinaya, at least if you like to take (esp. ten-precept) thilashins for novices.

29 Sep, 2016 10:28, monk Sarana

6-4

The problem with nuns is that in their presence monks may have difficulties keeping their lust at bay. This is fear of the lay people, not of the monks - who were subsequently without troubles when the nunnery was established! In other words, it is not appropriate to blame monks for having lust (and note that without the nun being lustful the two won't disrobe and get married) simply because the monks didn't show any troubles. It is the lay people's fear and desire to maintain the purity of the Buddhist community regardless whatever remained of it.

10 Oct, 2016 15:16, monk Sarana

6-5

This is yet another misrepresentation of the thilashin status versus bhikkhunī-sāmaṇerī ideal. It is not appropriate to represent this in such a misleading way. The nuns have to pay respect to novices not only because the novices follow ten precepts, but also because, just like the robes, alm-round, and many other cultural habits of Buddhism are derived from the country and time where the Buddha lived. The Buddha decided that nuns pay respect to monks because that was the way how the nuns' tradition would be acceptable in His society and time. It is difficult to remove or challenge decisions of the Buddha in scriptures, because such challenging could ultimately lead to serious decline in the present Buddhist culture - where many followers still attain enlightenment while they peacefully live and meditate in meditation centers, monasteries, and nunneries.

10 Oct, 2016 15:30, monk Sarana

6-6

Yes, here Mrs. Bricker has correctly mentioned the traditional misrepresentation of the rules and their meaning. Although "virtuous" is one of characteristics that play role in the Buddhist respect-system, sex, age, (and for lay people also the social status (e.g. servant<->king)) are also important. The bhikkhunīs would still pay respect to monks, simply because there the "sex" criteria plays role, and to preserve the Buddhist tradition as I explained above. However, note that (lay men) sons should pay respect to their mothers.

Sayadaw U Nandaka indicated to me that there is a deeper meaning in the Buddhist respect system, perhaps beyond our comprehension.

10 Oct, 2016 15:43, monk Sarana

7-1

Yes, this is important information. It is also good to note that they were not established in order to act as a court, but only to recheck danger posed by those who hold wrong view and kindly inform them of the unpleasant plans that government may have prepared for these. The government is not gullible, not even little bit controlled or influenced by the Sangha or any monks in the country. The government is free to arrest or execute any monk they decide. This is well known by the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Council and whatever they do is under pressure and requirement of the unrelenting government.

7-2 7 Oct, 2016 14:19, monk Sarana

Sometimes I cannot believe what I read. Mrs. Bricker is accusing monks of committing Pārājika offense - it would be Pārājika, the ultimate destruction of monk's life - if a monk falsely said he is an Arahant. I believe that Mrs. Bricker has gone too far in her misrepresentation of monks in Myanmar. I find it highly unsuitable.

7-3 10 Oct, 2016 16:01, monk Sarana

This danger of imprisonment is very serious and it should not be forgotten when monks are in (seeming) union about a decision. Decisions about religion in Myanmar is made by the government with the suggestions of certain monks, and other monks have to follow that, be silent, or be imprisoned. This was the case in the years important for bhikkhunī Saccavādī. It also explains why it is inappropriate to put blame on all monks who were simply present at the time when Burmese law was to be executed. Mrs. Bricker doesn't build the jigsaw in the way it was originally. I believe that the freedom of the government-selected monks to decide and express what they believe is better today.

7-4 29 Sep, 2016 10:41, monk Sarana

It is apparent that the pineapple trees belonged to Sangha. As such, the fruits should be given to lay people only if they are sick, on travel, or ask for them. (As I have explained, bhikkhuni-novice tradition has disappeared and renewal is not easy to accept if it is not specifically allowed, also because it would cause a massive change to the Burmese society - therefore monks are appropriately careful.) Mrs. Bricker doesn't mention that one of the nuns would ask the monks for the pineapples and would be refused. As far as I know, monks rarely ever refuse to give when they are asked.

7-5 10 Oct, 2016 16:01, monk Sarana

This is based on commentarial stories such as that of ven. Ānanda's previous life (Jātaka 544) and the story of ven. Isidāsī Bhikkhunī (Therīgāthā 15.1). Again, the scriptural authority is given predominance in order to preserve whatever has remained from the (supposedly) original Buddhist tradition.

7-6 3 Oct, 2016 16:10, monk Sarana

There is a number of verses in Kuṇḍāla Jātaka (J.536) which might have been the original base for this idea -

353. "Natthi tāsam vinayo na saṃvaro, majjamaṃsaniratā asaṇṇatā;
Tā gilanti purisassa pābhatam, sāgareva makaram timiṅgalo.

354. "Pañcakāmaguṇasātagocarā, uddhatā aniyatā asaṇṇatā;
Osaranti pamadā pamādinam, loṇatoyavatiyaṃva āpakā.

(E.B. Cowel, The Jātaka or Stories of the BUddha's Former Births, vol. V, p. 244)

"Given to strong drink and meat, one tries in vain; To curb their appetite or lust restrain,
Like to some fabled monster of the deep; Into their maw a man's whole wealth they sweep.

Lust's five-fold realm they own as their domain; Their swelling pride uncurbed none may restrain :
As rivers all to ocean find their way; So careless souls to women fall a pray."

Another, more accepted reason for "women would not be able to follow the precepts" is comparison to monks. If monks cannot follow perfectly their 227 rules, then how come women would follow 311? (Again, this is just an assumption of certain monks in relation to present monks' scrupulousness. The negative reports of unsuccessful Vinaya training of bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka, reported by women and nuns themselves, are certainly not helping to eradicate this assumption!)

7-7 29 Sep, 2016 11:31, monk Sarana

The law of statistics teaches that pretty much anything is possible at a large scale of measure. The percentage of monks misbehaving to this extent is extremely rare, especially in Myanmar.

8-1 7 Oct, 2016 14:39, monk Sarana

I would like to mention that there were two important sayadaws named Ādicca in recent Burmese history - Sayadaw Ādiccavaṃsa and Sayadaw Ādiccaraṃsī.

Sayadaw Ādiccavaṃsa published the books as mentioned by Mrs. Bricker, and really disrobed, and later passed away still as a lay person. Sayadaw Ādiccavaṃsa lived over a century ago.

A retired Burmese army general reported to my teacher Sayadaw U Paññāvaṃsa (the administration sayadaw of Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center), that Sayadaw U Ādiccaraṃsī, originally from Christian-Muslim family, as he was a Buddhist monk doing a lot of dangerous missionary among muslims, was invited for a meal (as a monk) and there he died on poisoned food. This was perhaps the result of the autopsy. Sayadaw U Ādiccaraṃsī is not known for any opinion on bhikkhunīs. Sayadaw U Ādiccaraṃsī lived 1938-2002.

8-2 29 Sep, 2016 11:41, monk Sarana

Mrs. Bricker doesn't mention whether the monk would be found guilty if he ordained the novices by small groups or one after another. In Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center novices and monks are ordained maximum by groups of three, even if they are fifty or more.

8-3 29 Sep, 2016 11:42, monk Sarana

This is an important mention where Mrs. Bricker confesses that there were also poor monks, beside the poor nuns.

8-4 3 Oct, 2016 15:57, monk Sarana

Monks are wealthy and in luxury for various reasons. I have read original Burmese account of Htut Kaung Sayadaw, accepted historically as Arahant, who, as an Arahant, would eat from 50 cups of different curries every day (he was supported by royalty). There were thilashins, such as Saya Kin and Saya May Nat Bay (about who I published my extensive notes in an issue of NewPilgrim) who were also lavishly supported by the royalty.

9-1 10 Oct, 2016 15:34, monk Sarana

Based on numerous misrepresentations above it is no more easy to believe that the situation happened exactly the way how it is described here.

I think, however, that if the monks said anything like this, it would refer to their believe that the "bhikkhunīs" of Sri Lanka are, based on the fact they were ordained by Mahayana bhikkhunīs, non-Theravada, and therefore following wrong views. If the Sayalay Saccavādī ordained under the bhikkhunīs of originally Mahāyāna sort, it would be assumed that she has rejected the tradition of Theravāda and follows rejected views.

It should be also mentioned that Sayalay Saccavādī was so renowned throughout Myanmar for her Burmese-Buddhist-Examination results, that young thilashins commonly had Sayalay Saccavādī's picture hanging on their wall for inspiration in their studies. Thus whatever Sayalay Saccavadi decided would, if not in accordance with the Sangha decision, have tremendous effect and possibly cause series of problems and issues in Burmese society.

She later lost all of her support of Burmese nuns and laity by the fact that she in fact stripped in front of the 47 State Saṅghamahānāyakas, as is well known by nuns and lay people throughout Myanmar and also mentioned by Hiroko Kawanami : "when she was asked to change back to the thilashin robe worn by Burmese nuns, she tried to undress in front of the members of Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka." The decision to put her to prison was based on this incident, explains Hiroko Kawanami (Buddhist Studies Review 24(2) 2007, 226–44, the Bhikkhunī Ordination debate, p.233) .

10 Oct, 2016 15:37, monk Sarana

9-2

It would be more intelligible that the government decided to arrest her for not following the wish of the State Saṅghamahānāyakas. If the word of the mahānāyakas was not important, why would they then issue a prohibition and ask her explicitly not to ordain? The audacity to disrespect one's super-superiors is unbelievable given the fact she was ready even to go to her country and face the ultimate destruction. Can you imagine a young nun bravely facing 47 old monks, thinking "I know, you don't"? This is a folly at best : prison, no more access to Myanmar, lost all respect among monks, nuns, and laity, and whole life marked by unpleasant rejection. A knowledgeable Burmese nun shared with me that Sayalay/Bhikkhunī Saccavādī is known throughout Myanmar as an arrogant and selfish nun who, anyway, disrobed!

29 Sep, 2016 12:54, monk Sarana

9-3

Interestingly, no more police was waiting to arrest her, and she even passed through the customs.

29 Sep, 2016 12:55, monk Sarana

9-4

for being a bhikkhunī. - this is however conclusion only known to the non-Burmese. The Burmese people are aware of the fact that she was arrested for stripping in front of State Sangha Maha Nayakas.

10 Oct, 2016 15:35, monk Sarana

9-5

Unfortunately, these cannot be translated by anyone who sides with Mrs. Bricker, because they contain detailed criticism of the mistakes that she made when becoming a bhikkhunī (such as omitting the phase of sikkhamānā).

A draft of unpublished translation has been made by Dr. Hla Myint of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Myanmar. However, it was not published for the fears that official publication by the Ministry of Religious Affairs might cause political misunderstandings with Sri Lanka, whose "bhikkhunī" are specifically mentioned there. Dr. Hla Myint told me in a personal conversation that it is alright to make and publish the translation by somebody who is not working for the ministry.

The account of Saccavādī is the very basis for the second book of Bhikkhunī Vinicchaya Sar-Tan (149p. in PDF). The introduction to the resolution of ven. Āciṇṇa on page 121 (PDF p.131) speaks more or less about the folly of Sayalay Saccavādī to disobey the prohibition of the State Saṅghamahānāyakas. The disobedience seems to me, from the text, as the core of the problem.

10 Oct, 2016 15:42, monk Sarana

9-6

I think I have this book, but on the front cover, as well as inside, the book's name is "Yakhu Kalaway Theravada Buddha Thathanatawnai Bhikkhuni Shithint Mashithint Pyahsoya Pshithaw Bhikkhuni Vinicchaya Sar-Tan" (= "The Document on Resolution of Bhikkhuni(s) Which Explains Whether Bhikkhuni(s) Should Be or Should Not Be [included*] In The Buddha's Dispensation of Theravāda In This Era.")

- the book I have is from 2006, and the person mentioned as responsible for the publication is U Zar Ni Win. I am however quite sure that the book I have is the one Mrs. Bricker speaks about, because the only word that she has translated "wrong" (or misinterpreted?) of the book is "illegal". This "illegal" is, in fact, written as "Should Be or Should Not Be" (as I mentioned above). All else is same.

*This word I included to make more sense in English.

10 Oct, 2016 15:41, monk Sarana

9-7

The name of this book, however, is only "Bhikkhunī Bhavābhāva Vinicchaya" (= The Resolution on Bhikkhunī's Existence and Non-Existence) . The way how Mrs. Bricker represents the name of the book in English is seriously wrong. Why would she like to misrepresent and distort information in this way?

- The book I have is from the same year, same publisher, same director of publishing.

- I have read the passages regarding the required apology from Bhikkhunī Saccavādī, why and how that should be done. It is all included in detail, including her address in Myanmar and ID Card number. There is also complete list of the sayadaws responsible/acknowledging the resolution - and one of them is Yaw Sayadaw (Ven. Sirindābhivaṃsa), the present chief abbot of Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center. Interestingly, Yaw Sayadaw was one of Sayalay Saccavādī's Dhamma teachers and also did his best to prevent her from ordaining as a bhikkhunī.